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CHAPTER IX

MARRIAGE

Polygyny and the Child-bride

The institution of the child-bride, combined with polygyny, was characteristic of Gros Ventre marriage up to about 1880. How far back it was practiced is difficult to say. Our informants who themselves were married off as children of ten or eleven to their first husbands about the year 1865, took the custom for granted and so far as they knew "it had always been that way."[1]

All girls were given in marriage before puberty, and usually as wives to older men with independent households. Because of the disparity in age between husband and child-bride, many of these girls were widowed early and remarriage was quickly arranged for them, even if the widow were not claimed by her husband's brother. Moreover, divorce or separation initiated by the husband was relatively easy and frequent. Consequently the majority of Gros Ventre women knew at least three or four different husbands, and often in fairly rapid succession. Upon successive remarriages the wife's age came to approximate more closely that of her husband.

Young men were not eligible for marriage until about twenty. By that time a young man would have attained proficiency in hunting and have taken the first steps in ceremonial life, being a member of one or other of the two adult men's societies, either the Wolf-men or the Stars. In addition he should have war-deeds to his credit and some property of his own, especially horses stolen from the enemy, in order to qualify as husband. In view of the fact, however, that very young girls were given more often to older already-married men, most young men marrying for the first time had as wife "an older experienced woman." Actually

[1] It was believed that a girl could not menstruate until after she had experienced sexual intercourse. If, therefore, a girl had her first menses before she had been given in marriage, her family would be disgraced.

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S93 S62 me go because by mother's brother was in the Sacrifice Dance and I was supposed to be there to give things away in his honor. He was mean about it, but I got to that one thing. Another time though, I was scraping hides and I heard it announced in the camp circle that a relative of mine had been killed at war. Of course I went right away to mourn for him. But when I got back, my husband was furious. He yelled at me: 'You ought to stay home and attend to your work!' and then gave me an awful beating."

It was usually of little avail for a woman to return home with grievances against her husband because it was assumed that a wife deserved the type of treatment she received. Generally her S93 S86 family would send her back to her husband promptly and often with a present for him to show their good will. Only under exceptional circumstances was the wife allowed to initiate separation from her husband. If he grossly neglected her and showed his indifference openly, she might be permitted to remain with her family. Should the husband not send for her, they were then free to arrange for her another marriage. Coming Daylight gave as an example her own experience, which was considered as somewhat unusual. "My uncle had arranged as our third marriage for my younger sister and me to go to a man who later turned out to be a poor provider. He seldom got buffalo meat, and he didn't water the horses, or do the other things he was supposed to. He was so busy chasing other women he didn't have time for anything else! One day, however, a friend of his came and told us that our husband was planning to publicly throw us away. His uncle came to see our husband that same day and tried to persuade him not to do it. Among other things he told him: 'You have such nice quiet industrious women. Just think of all the robes they have dressed for you!' But our husband just sat there with his head bowed and didn't say anything, and we knew then that he was going to do it. So I told my sister when he went out: 'We will get ready and throw him away before he has a chance.' I had a horse of my own, and we packed all our belongings as quickly as possible and went back to our uncle. When he found out what that man was going to do, of course he didn't make us go back. Our husband was in the wrong. He didn't

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have any reason to suspect us [of infidelity] so he shouldn't have been planning to get rid of us." 586

It was said that in case a husband abused his wife without reason his relatives remonstrated with him, reminding him, for instance, that if he acquired a reputation for ill-treating his wife he might have difficulty in obtaining additional wives of good reputation. Some claimed that his maternal uncle could go so far as to remove the wife from her husband's household "until he came to his senses." Such interference was however seemingly rare. A wife was seldom given the benefit of any doubt.

The husband had the right to punish, even with death, any departure from the standard of chastity set for women. [684]

Most of the harsh treatment accorded to wives was believed to have been the result of just suspicion of their infidelity, where sufficient evidence was lacking to prove it. Girls were warned before marriage to so conduct themselves as to avoid their husbands' jealousy at all costs. They were told, for instance, that when visiting other women it was well to be chaperoned since otherwise a jealous husband could magnify an innocent visit into an incipient affair with the woman's husband. While it was considered within the proprieties for women to go out and count coups on the enemy fallen near camp, "they didn't approve of women chasing off on horseback to 'hit the enemy' because their husbands were sure to suspect they were off to meet some man." A girl was instructed by her relatives to yield willingly to her husband when he claimed his marital rights lest he interpret her reluctance as preference for another. 593 [726]

On the other hand, when there was reasonable proof of the wife's infidelity, the husband was more or less forced by public opinion to take some action against her. He was, however, allowed considerable latitude in choosing among several equally honorable alternatives. 593 684

The extreme punishment was that of death, and apparently it was not uncommonly applied. Among the cases described was the following which concerned a contemporary of Singer and Coming Daylight. "On one occasion a man discovered that one of his wives was missing. As usual in such circumstances, he inquired whether any man in the camp was unaccounted for. He soon

2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
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'It is a good thing you cleaned my nose, because for that I am giving you that woman over there.'" 684 558

A husband who had harbored an unfaithful wife was likewise within his rights in "throwing her away." This was accomplished by his going to a public gathering and simply throwing down a stick to indicate that he was through with her. Whoever wished might pick up the stick and claim her as his wife without giving any compensation. 684 586

It was said, too, that if a man was "big enough" to allow his wife to go unpunished for adultery he usually would not refuse to eventually let her go to some lesser man who demeaned himself by asking for her. Thick related details of several transactions of this kind which occurred when he was a young boy. One of these was as follows:

"There was a man who had several wives, perhaps four. One day another man came to his lodge. He invited him in and said: 'This is the first time you ever came into my lodge, my friend. You must have a reason to come now, after all this time.' Then he said to his wife: 'Woman, get up and cook for my friend.' So the visitor spoke up: 'Well, my friend, the purpose of my coming here is to ask you for that Arapaho woman. I am not married now, I haven't a wife at present and I need a wife.' The host replied: 'All right, my friend, she is yours. After you eat, you could take her home.' When he had finished eating, the visitor said: 'Well, my friend, I have to go a little further. I want that boy of hers too.' The host answered: 'I hate to let my children go, but since he is so small you could take him, but don't ask for any of the others.' So the visitor, happy that he had gotten this woman without much talk and a boy as well, said: 'Well, my friend, since you are so good to me and give me your boy, I will give you a horse, my last horse.' It turned out that he was as good to this boy, whom he had attained in this way, as he would have been to his own son." It should be noted that the horse was given voluntarily and because of the child rather than in compensation for the wife.

It was the opinion of those women who had lived under this system, wherein the authority of the husband was so great, that all in all it worked well. They admitted that an occasional woman 595 562

3: Cooper E-5 (1938-1940) 1957
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608 them. Crow Bull's ceremonial grandson, whom he had instructed during the Crazy Dance and who was a relative of Black Raven, heard about this and ran in front of Crow Bull, saying: "Grandfather, don't do anything," and grabbed him just when he was about to fire. So Crow Bull said: "All right, because my grandchild stopped me." Then the relatives of Black Raven collected horses and blankets and other valuables, the young man himself contributing a blanket, and they all marched to Crow Bull's lodge carrying the goods and leading the horses. On arrival at the lodge, the guilty lover went in first with the fine blanket he was giving and did a great thing. He covered White Skunk, Crow Bull's "dearly-loved child"[7] with this blanket. So Crow Bull could hardly do or say anything. He just said, "Well, I will leave it up to my son White Skunk, whatever he says, I will do." White Skunk then said: "Just give her (Iron Woman) to that man (Kitfox). Just let her go," and that is what Crow Bull did. He got all these horses and blankets and other things in payment.[8] Thus even though Crow Bull was so angry, his "grandchild" could stop him.

[586] If a woman left her husband, and her "grandfather" went to her and told her to go back to her husband for she had nothing to get mad about, she would have to do so no matter how much she dreaded it.

608 682 If one Gros Ventre had murdered another, and the relatives of the murdered person were afraid to approach the victim's father to offer indemnity, they could offer a pipe to any one of the father's ceremonial grandfathers. If the grandfather accepted it, he prayed with it and smoked it. When the murderer's relatives were ready with horses and clothing for payment, the grandfather would lead the relatives to his grandson, the murdered person's father, and say to him: "I have brought these people who ask your forgiveness. They are bringing these horses and blankets to you. I am asking you as my 'grandchild' to accept." The father could not refuse, for if he refused, some evil would overtake him. Actually refusals to such requests by a "grandfather" did not occur, to our informants' knowledge.

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[7] For details on the dearly-loved child, see Flannery, 1941, pp. 33-37.

[8] For a discussion of indemnity in case of adultery see Flannery, 1953, pp. 185-88; for indemnity in case of murder, idem, p. 45.

796 be repeated so that it was something of an ordeal. The sword owners would see to it that the dancers kept up, prodding the laggards until the series of songs had been completed.

[533] [177] The singers themselves had a smoking song, one of the few songs of the Grass dance for which words were adopted along with the tunes [11] from the Assiniboine. This song indicated a period of rest and relaxation for all but it was required that one of the officers provide the pipe and mixture for the singers.

Any member who left the dancing-place was obliged to surrender some piece of personal property as insurance that he would return. If he did not come back, the property was forfeit.

796 [43] 586 Another distinctive feature of the earlier Grass dance was the throwing away of property and especially of wives. The term "throwing away" is appropriate because a stick was held in the hand and after the holder publicly announced what the stick represented he would throw it to the ground. If, for instance, a member of the society had decided to give away his wife he would take a stick and say: "Here is so-and-so (naming the woman)" and throw the stick down. Sometimes another member would pick up the stick, thus indicating that he was taking this woman, but occasionally it happened that no one grabbed her and in such case the wife in question would return to live with her own relatives. The man who so renounced his wife was supposed to be through with her for good. It was said by informants, however, that once in a while, provided the wife had not been claimed 522 by another, the husband would want her back again. An in- 796 stance in illustration of this point was told to me. A man who 586 stood to my informant in the relation of enemy-friend [12] had so 572 disposed of his wife at a Grass dance. Some time later my informant saw the couple together again. My informant took ad-

[533] [177] [11] Most of the Gros Ventre Grass dance songs have no words proper. This contrasts with the Arapaho Grass dance songs, as my informants are well aware. The difference is perhaps due to the influence on the Arapaho of the Ghost Dance religion (cf. Kroeber, A. L., The Arapaho, AMNH-B 18, pt. 4, 1907, p. 320), which scarcely affected the Gros Ventres.

[572] [12] This was a joking and rivalry relationship entered into by presenting to a fellow tribesman an object captured from the enemy.

7: Flannery E-5 (1940, 1945) 1947
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vantage of the occasion, as she had the right to do, to make fun of her enemy-friend without his being able to retaliate. She took a handful of horse manure and rubbed it all over his face saying, "Oh! All of us at the Grass dance saw you throw her away, why are you going with her again?" and in this way called attention to the fact that he was not so "brave" as he had pretended to be.

Another informant stated that she and her sister were just able to escape the embarrassing experience of so being given away. They were both living with a man who was a prominent member of the Wolf society. One of his fellow-members, however, came to the two women and told them that their husband planned on throwing them both away at the forthcoming Grass dance. My informant was very angry to get this news and said to her sister: "We will get ready and get rid of him first!" Whereupon they packed their belongings and taking their own horses went quickly to their mother's brother. My informant said that this man who was going to throw them away tried many times to speak to her thereafter but she always turned away and refused to listen, thinking to herself: "Well, there are plenty of other men."

As a final point in the discussion of the earlier form of the Grass dance, the custom of members giving away presents in honor of their loved ones should be mentioned. This was a purely voluntary procedure and could be done by any member who wished to do so at any performance of the Grass dance. The following is a typical example of how this was carried out. The same informant last mentioned, married another member of the Wolf society not long after the incident she described above, and had been selected as one of the four women singers for the Grass dance. At one performance she was holding her infant daughter, her first child by this marriage, as she sang. Her husband, wishing to honor his little daughter, told a war story, went to his wife and took the child in his arms and, going to the center of the dancing-place, gave away a horse to one of the Assiniboine who happened to be visiting at the time of the dance.

Such was the form of the Grass dance as carried out by the

7: Flannery E-5 (1940, 1945) 1947
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to provide food for the next dance. If he failed to redeem it by such promise, he had one more chance to do so by appearing at the following dance. If he did not show up on that occasion the announcer was told to call out: "The one who owns this bridle (or belt, or gun, etc.) does not want it." Whereupon the article would be thrown in the fire and destroyed.

Although the custom of "throwing away" wives gradually died out, the giving away of valuable property to honor loved ones continued and was elaborated. The following is only one example from many which might be cited as illustrative of attitudes. The informant is now a man in his early seventies. He stated: "When I was a young man I never went to these social affairs. After I married my wife would go with my older brother every time there was a Grass dance, but I would stay at home. This brother of mine used to get after me for not taking part. He would say: 'It is bad to be the way you are. When there is a dance or anything going on, go and look on. You don't necessarily have to dance, but at least be present.' One time in later years the Cheyenne came to visit and of course the Gros Ventres put on a dance for them. I decided to go and for the first time I joined in. When my brother saw me he got up and said: 'Well, my friends, I have been asking my brother to look on and to take part in these dances, and I have never succeeded. But today I see him at this dance and I am glad he is here. I am glad he is joining with us.' Then my brother went out and brought to the dancing-place a new yellow-wheeled buggy and a set of harness he had just purchased, and announced: 'Now, because my brother has joined the dance I am proud he did, and in his honor I am giving away this buggy and harness to the visitors.' Then my brother's wife announced: 'I am happy that my brother-in-law is joining the dance. I will give a beef to the visitors so they will kill it and have meat to eat.' Of course I felt embarrassed. It was hard on me because I thought everybody was looking at me and I sweated. Afterwards I told my brother: 'I didn't go in there for the purpose of having you give away all that stuff in my honor!' But he replied: 'Well, that is the way of our people